OURSELVES OR NOTHING

FOR TERRENCE DES PRES

After seven years and as the wine leaves and black trunks of maples wait beyond the window, I think of you north, in the few lighted rooms of that ruined house, a candle in each open pane of breath, the absence of anyone, snow in a hurry to earth, my fingernails pressing half moons into the sill as I watched you pouring three then four fingers of Scotch over ice, the chill in your throat like a small blue bone, those years of your work on the Holocaust. You had to walk off the darkness, miles of winter riverfront, windows the eyes in skulls along the river, gratings in the streets over jewelled human sewage, your breath hanging about your face like tobacco. I was with you even then, your face the face of a clock as you swept through the memoirs of men and women who would not give up. In the short light of Decembers, you took suppers of whole white hens and pans of broth in a city of liquor bottles and light. Go after that which is lost and all the mass graves of the century’s dead will open into your early waking hours: Belsen, Dachau, Saigon, Phnom Penh and the one meaning Bridge of Ravens, Sao Paulo, Armagh, Calcutta, Salvador, although these are not the same. You wrote too of Theresienstadt, that word that ran screaming into my girlhood, lifting its grey wool dress, the smoke in its violent plumes and feathers, the dark wormy heart of the human desire to die. In Prague, Anna told me, there was bread, stubborn potatoes and fish, armies and the women who lie down with them, eggs perhaps but never meat, never meat but the dead. In Theresienstadt she said there was only the dying. Never bread, potatoes, fish or women. They were all as yet girls then. Vast numbers of men and women died, you wrote, because they did not have time, the blessing of sheer time, to recover. Your ration of time was smaller then, a tin spoon of winter, piano notes one at a time from the roof to the gutter. I am only imagining this, as I had not yet entered your life like the dark fact of a gun on your pillow, or Anna Akhmatova’s “Requiem” and its final I can when the faceless woman before her asked can you describe this? I was not yet in your life when you turned the bullet toward the empty hole in yourself and whispered: finish this or die. But you lived and what you wrote became The Survivor, that act of contrition for despair: They turned to face the worst

straight-on, without sentiment or hope, simply to keep watch over life. Now, as you sleep face down on your papers, the book pages turning of themselves in your invisible breath, I climb the stairs of that house, fragile with age and the dry fear of burning and I touch the needle to music to wake you, the snow long past falling, something by Vivaldi or Brahms. I have come from our cacophonous ordinary lives where I stood at the sink last summer scrubbing mud from potatoes and listening to the supper fish in the skillet, my eyes on the narrowed streets of rain through the window as I thought of the long war that misted country turned to the moon’s surface, grey and ring-wormed with ridges of light, the women in their silk ao dais along the river, those flowers under fire, rolled at night in the desperate arms of American men. Once I walked your rooms with my nightdress open, a cigarette from my lips to the darkness and back as you worked at times through to the morning. Always on my waking you were gone, the blue holes of your path through snow to the road, your face still haggard in the white mirror, the pained note where ten times you had written the word recalcitrance and once: you will die and live under the name of someone
who has actually died.
I think of that night in a tropic hotel,
the man who danced with a tray over his head
and offered us free because we were socialistas,
not only that, he sang, but young and pretty.
Later as I lay on a cot in the heat naked
my friend was able to reach for the guns
and load them clicking in the moonlight
with only the barest of sounds;
he had heard them before me moving among the palms.
We were going to die there.
I remember the moon notching its way
through the palms and the calm sense that came
for me at the end of my life. In that moment
the woman beside me became my sister,
her hand cupping her mouth, the blood
that would later spill from her face
if what we believed were the truth.
Her blood would crawl black and belly-down
onto a balcony of hands and flashlights,
cameras, flowers, propaganda.
Her name was Renée and without knowing
her you wrote: all things human take time,
time which the damned never have, time for life
to repair at least the worst of its wounds;
it took time to wake, time for horror
to incite revolt, time for the recovery
of lucidity and will.
In the late afternoons you returned,
the long teeth shining from the eaves,
a clink in the wood half-burnt
and as you touched it alive:
ici repose un déporté inconnu.
In the mass graves, a woman's hand
caged in the ribs of her child,
a single stone in Spain beneath olives,
in Germany the silent windy fields,
in the Soviet Union where the snow
is scarred with wire, in Salvador
where the blood will never soak
into the ground, everywhere and always
we hover in a calm protected world like
netted fish, exactly like netted fish.
It is either the beginning or the end
of the world, and the choice is ourselves
or nothing.